

Estonia

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Freedom of the Press

The constitution provides for freedoms of speech and the press, and the government respects these rights in practice. Libel is not a criminal offense, but journalists can be sued for civil defamation, and several such cases were filed in 2012. However, there were no reports of civil defamation cases against journalists in 2013. Legal amendments enacted in 2010 contained provisions that many observers regarded as threats to freedom of speech, including a measure that would allow courts to jail journalists for refusing to disclose their sources in cases involving major crimes. While the amendments have drawn criticism from rights groups, no one has been prosecuted under them to date.

In June 2009, the Supreme Court ruled that web portals and online news outlets could be held responsible for reader comments posted on their sites. The case was referred to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), and in October 2013 the ECHR upheld the Supreme Court ruling, stating that holding online portals liable for comments was a justifiable restriction on freedom of expression given the offensive nature of the comments in this case, the portal's financial gain for publicizing them, and the fact that the Estonian court imposed a reasonable fine for damages. Many free speech organizations found the ruling to be a significant potential threat to freedom of expression online, as it could lead websites to suppress legitimate user comments.

The Public Information Act, the primary law governing freedom of information, obliges the authorities to assist citizens in accessing public documents. Estonia is among 14 countries that signed the Council of Europe's Convention on Access to Official Documents, which establishes the right of anyone to request information held by public authorities at no charge.

There are two press councils in the country, and public-service broadcasting is supervised by the Estonian Broadcasting Council (RHN). The RHN has nine members—five politicians and four professionals—who are elected by Parliament. In May 2012, after the terms of the four independent experts expired, the ruling coalition replaced them with its own appointees without a public debate.

The country's numerous media outlets carry a wide variety of views, generally without government interference. In December 2012, however, Prime Minister Andrus Ansip questioned the integrity of some journalists as he responded to media criticism of his environment minister. Several politicians also criticized the public broadcaster, Eesti Rahvusringhääling (Estonian Public Broadcasting, or ERR), calling for the regulation of journalistic activities, but such comments did not translate into action in 2013. In November 2013, Minister of Culture Rein Lang announced that he would resign following a scandal involving a leadership change at *Sirp*, a publicly owned newspaper. It was alleged that Lang used his political power to influence the paper's decision to hire Kaur Kender as the new editor in chief. Lang denied the allegations, but chose to resign after it became clear that it would be difficult for him to effectively continue his work as minister of culture. On December 4, former news anchor and editor Urve Tiidus was appointed to the ministerial post.

The Estonian-language print media landscape includes four national dailies as well as regional, municipal, and weekly papers. At the end of 2013 it was reported that newspaper circulation had declined for the four major daily papers, with decreases in circulation ranging from 5 to 11 percent compared with the previous year. ERR operates two television stations (ETV and ETV2) and five radio stations. There are two primary

national commercial television stations—Kanal2 and TV3—and a large number of private radio stations and cable and satellite services. Many commercial broadcasters have been struggling financially even as cable operators continue to earn profits. In November 2012, Parliament amended a law that obliged cable operators to retransmit all free-to-air television channels, clarifying that the broadcasters can charge “reasonable” fees to cable services for their content.

Media ownership has become increasingly concentrated over the years, with Scandinavian business interests taking a significant share, particularly in the television sector. For the country’s sizable Russian-speaking population, there are television and radio programs in Russian (including on ERR), Russian-language newspapers, and access to broadcast and print media from Russia. As a result of the country’s 2009 economic crisis, a number of print outlets either ceased publishing or cut staff and salaries and reduced their output. The recession also led to significant declines in the advertising market. However, the country recovered quickly, and the decline in advertising revenues has since slowed or reversed, particularly in the internet sector.

Estonia remains among the leading countries in the world regarding internet penetration, with approximately 80 percent of the population enjoying access in 2013. Several newspapers have gone online in recent years, and online-only news portals have an extensive readership.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

16

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

5

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

4

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

7

